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ABSTRACT

This paper reports selected findings from a study of formal, institution-wide planning in the United States undertaken by the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance, located at the University of Maryland. The study included a review of higher education planning literature, a survey of administrators at 256 institutions, and intensive interviewing at 16 of those institutions. The study found that the following factors, among others, limit successful formal institution-wide planning: lack of trust and fundamental disagreements over the character of an institution; ideological conflicts over planning concepts; expectations that planning will eliminate decision-making politics; inconsistencies between planning structures and regular institutional decision-making structures and processes; incorrect assumptions about sources of initiatives for change; lack of advocates for specific changes; incorrect assumptions about types of information needed to plan; failure to find a planning process that effectively balances requirements for flexibility with those for control; pressures to address immediate concerns; costs of comprehensive planning processes; and failure to view planning as learning. Characteristics and approaches common to institutions that were successfully determining their directions, despite these many impediments, are outlined. (Six references.) (JDD)

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PLANNING FOR QUALITY: PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES

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PLANNING FOR QUALITY: PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES

Introduction

This paper reports selected findings and conclusions drawn from a three-year study of formal, institution-wide planning in the United States. The study was undertaken by the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance, located at the University of Maryland, College Park. The study included a review of higher education planning literature (Schmidtlein and Milton, 1990), a survey of administrators at 256 institutions and intensive interviewing at 16 of those institutions. An earlier paper, presented at the Tenth European Association for Institutional Research Forum, reported on the nature of the study and described factors, revealed by an initial analysis of interview findings, that often appeared to limit the effectiveness of formal planning practices in colleges and universities (Schmidtlein and Milton, 1989). This paper extends those earlier observations and contains suggestions on ways planning processes might avoid problems that restricted the effectiveness of past efforts.

There has been a rapid growth of interest in higher education planning in the United States during the past 25 years. Books, journal articles and workshops on this topic have proliferated. A professional association concerned with higher education planning was formed in 1966, the Society for College and University planning. It now has over 1,800 members and publishes its own journal (Planning for Higher Education). Currently, U. S. higher education institutions are spending considerable amounts of time and money on planning but evidence from research and literature suggests they generally are not getting the returns expected from these efforts (Schmidtlein and Milton, 1989 and 1990). Many authors suggest reasons for

the limited success of planning in higher education. Among them, Wildavsky (1973) suggests planning is so encompassing a concept that it is difficult to distinguish from other organizational functions. Schmidtlein (1983) contrasts assumptions underlying planning concepts of decision making and "incremental" decision making. He concludes that the constraints and values affecting decision making in education are more consistent with incremental than with formal planning concepts. Van Vught (1988) also describes conflicts between assumptions underlying planning concepts and characteristics of decision making in higher education. The literature review, conducted as part of the study, revealed that most planning literature recommends ways to plan but there are few studies that examined processes in operation for longer than a year.

Factors That Impede Formal Institution-Wide Planning

Among factors found to limit successful formal institution- wide planning were:

- lack of trust and fundamental disagreements over the character of an institution,
- ideological conflicts over planning concepts,
- expectations that planning will eliminate decision making politics,
- inconsistencies between planning structures and regular institutional decision making structures and processes,
- incorrect assumptions about sources of initiatives for change,
- lack of advocates for specific changes,
- incorrect assumptions about types of information needed to plan,

- failure to find a planning process that effectively balances requirements for flexibility with those for control,
- an uncertain future,
- pressures to address immediate concerns,
- costs of comprehensive planning processes,
- avoidance of politically sensitive but critical issues,
- unrealistic expectations that planning will increase resources,
- unrealistic beliefs that units will reveal priorities and openly discuss problems,
- problems in reconciling unit interests with the collective interest of the institution, and
- failure to view planning as learning.

Each of these impediments to planning successfully are described below.

Lack of Trust and Confidence Among Participants

At a number of institutions visited, various parties expressed distrust about the motives and interests of others at their institutions. Such suspicion was most common among faculty who frequently questioned whether administrators had their best interests in mind. Planning often is advocated as a means to overcome such distrust. However, findings from the visits suggest that reasons for such distrust are complex and frequently go beyond failures to communicate and provide access to decision making. Some of the planning processes observed were hampered by these underlying pathologies.

Lack of Agreement on an Institution's Character

At several institutions fundamental disputes were reported over their missions and future directions. Many interviewed said that resolution of

such differences was necessary before successful planning was possible. Comprehensive planning processes, employing a committee or committees, generally did not succeed in articulating clear visions of an institutions character, mission and directions when there were fundamental disagreements. The ideologies and partisan interests of the participants made a workable consensus difficult to obtain. Institutional visions and mission statements appeared to come from presidents and, often, become a part of an institution's culture and traditions. Able presidents articulate their vision for an institution and "sell" their view to constituencies. Several presidents at the institutions visited had not successfully settled mission disputes and these lingering disagreements frustrated their attempts to plan. At some institutions visions of their character and mission appeared to go back to founding ideologies and actions of early leaders. Mission disagreements with external agencies such as multicampus system offices and state board offices particularly impeded planning. These conflicts, sometimes involving regional political ambitions, led to plans that could not be implemented because the external agencies had authority to approve new programs and budgets.

Conflict Over Theories and Concepts of Planning

Most persons interviewed believed planning was important but not being properly implemented at their institutions. However, some questioned the legitimacy and validity of institution-wide formal planning. Several described, what they believed to be, a fundamental conflict between the concept of planning and pluralistic democratic forms of decision making. Others observed that faculty view institutions as driven by economic circumstances, not by planning. One person at a non-traditional institution

said his college would not exist if its creation had been based on strategic planning. An academic administrator observed that planning theory suggests starting with goals, then strategies and finally resources. He said he started from the other end - first determining faculty capabilities, then feasible strategies and, finally, possible goals. Such skepticism about the usefulness of formal planning lead to considerable cynicism among many participants, particularly faculty and persons who had experienced previous planning efforts. This skepticism appeared to be somewhat more prevalent in graduate/research universities than in other four-year and two-year institutions but many persons at all types of institutions expressed similar sentiments. The existence of such cynicism, particularly if well founded, poses a serious challenge to planning.

Conflict With Established Decision Making Patterns.

Planning processes that did not involve, and have the support of those responsible for affected functions, were not successful. Power is dispersed at most institutions and power relationships are highly complex. Faculty have a major role in decisions on academic matters and administrators have major influence on budget allocations. In addition, external constituencies and agencies frequently play important roles in some decisions, particularly at public campuses. Consequently, decisions typically involve reconciling many competing values and interests. Planning processes that did not recognize these realities, and were not carefully integrated into existing decision making patterns, were rarely successful. Frequently such processes appeared to seek technically sophisticated plans while failing to give attention to the more difficult problem of creating the consensus needed to implement their recommendations.

Expectation That Planning Will Eliminate Politics

A few persons viewed planning as a means to eliminate or lessen "political" means of resolving issues by employing "rational" decision making techniques. Planning was seen as a way to overcome the effects of individuals and units pursuing their narrow self-interests and excessively protecting their own "turfs." Decisions presumably would be made on the basis of objective data and the "merits" of alternatives, with decision-making occurring primarily through hierarchical structures. They believed data collection and analysis would illuminate decisions on campus directions and reduce conflicts over appropriate courses of action. These views ignored campus governance realities. Decisions typically involve reconciling many values and interests in a democratic fashion. Decision power on a campus is quite dispersed. Faculty have the major role in decisions on academic matters. Various units on campuses have considerable autonomy, based on norms for organizations composed of professionals. This diffusion of power on a campus does not lend itself to imposing on others, without compromise and accommodation, the views of any one party. Planning is one ingredient in this political process, not a means to eliminate or lessen significantly its effects. An interviewee noted: "Issue avoidance and lack of follow-up cannot be fixed by planning."

Incorrect Assumptions About Sources of Initiatives

The comments of those interviewed indicated that different types of initiatives came from different locations within institutions. The source of initiatives appeared to depend upon the character of the effort, campus structure, and interests of campus constituencies. The primary source of ideas in areas such as research and instruction was, as one might suspect,

faculty. They possess the primary expertise in their domains and typically are most aware of developments and opportunities within their fields. There are, however, potential new research and instructional initiatives that are not represented by current faculty expertise and do not easily fit the mission or role of any one unit. Such initiatives involve establishing new programs, departments or activities that cut across disciplines. Therefore, their constituencies, if any, and advocates are located in several departments. Consequently, such initiatives frequently are generated by deans, provosts, presidents or other administrators whose purview encompassed clusters of units. These officials, of course, utilize faculty committees to help identify and define such initiatives. Initiatives resulting from consequences of external trends and pressures, that affect an entire campus, generally originate with presidents or chief academic officers, sometimes with support or encouragement from a governing board or other external agencies. Planning processes that do not recognize differing sources of initiatives are unlikely to be effective.

Lack of Advocates for Initiatives and Issues

One student of planning observed that initiatives, if they are to succeed, need advocates (Dunn, 1990). Unless someone is responsible for promoting an initiative or resolving an issue, few results are likely. Many persons observed that committees rarely champion initiatives and follow through to assure they are implemented. Several persons said great ideas come from great minds, not from committees. Planning processes that did not involve those responsible for implementation rarely had their recommendations implemented. Many interviewed suggested planning processes should emphasize entrepreneurship rather than rely on formal structures,

large committees and regular cycles. Entrepreneurial planning, accompanied by positive incentives for innovation, and rewards for risk taking, were believed to be more likely to encourage new initiatives and follow-through on plans.

Incorrect Assumptions About Sources of Intelligence.

Literature on strategic planning frequently stresses the importance of organizational intelligence and "future-scanning." Institutions in this study, however, rarely used formal processes to examine longer-term prospects. President's and others sought data and analyses of trends and circumstances confronting their institution. However, their principal sources of intelligence were reported to be conferences, personal conversations, literature on higher education and contemporary issues and observations of trusted associates. Most persons interviewed had a reasonably good grasp of trends and events affecting their campus. The major problem they confronted was not so much a failure to perceive emerging challenges but rather an inability to achieve sufficient consensus, both internally and externally, to take courses of action consistent with any one interpretation of their circumstances.

Only one institution was employing a formal process to examine long-term prospects and this effort was not part of a regular planning cycle. Institutions were confronted with urgent decisions, and those interviewed considered it unproductive to devote extensive time to contemplating future conditions; particularly since most important developments were not predictable. One person noted that all it took to invalidate their planning was a murder or a rape at their institution. The pressures of immediate problems did not permit much time for speculating

about an uncertain future. However, periodic staff retreats, where long-range concerns were discussed, generally were considered beneficial.

Finding an Appropriate Balance Between Flexibility and Control

Many interviewed commented on difficulties their institutions had finding an appropriate balance between 1) central planning and coordination and 2) flexibility needed for units to be entrepreneurial. Many complained that state, system and institutional requirements and processes frequently discouraged or delayed initiatives, or made them inordinately expensive. Such requirements were reported to have a deadening affect on an institution's quest for quality. They condemned time consuming, rigid planning processes that discouraged giving prompt attention to issues except in the context of a planning cycle and/or that required time consuming justifications to depart from out-dated plans. Most persons believed institutions should err in favor of flexibility rather than risking too much coordination and control. Some saw planning as an impediment to the opportunism needed for effective entrepreneurship. Many believed effective coordination resulted more from an "atmosphere" encouraging informal contacts and candor among parties than from relying on formal structures and processes. However, the major benefit most persons saw from planning was improved communication and learning. Many noted, though, that this communication and learning frequently were unnecessarily costly because of overly formalized processes. Institutions that appeared most successful sought institutional cultures and decision processes that fostered entrepreneurship and avoided time consuming, rigid structures and procedures.

Uncertain Future Circumstances

The most common complaint about planning from those interviewed was the futility of anticipating future circumstances. Too rigid an adherence to inaccurate predictions created problems. One multicampus system was accused of severely under-budgeting its institutions as a result of under-estimates of enrollment that guided state appropriations. Similarly, a senior academic officer pointed out that had major recommendations of a 15 year old institutional plan been implemented, they would have seriously harmed the institution. The decisions of state political agencies were viewed as highly unpredictable. One person observed that "what comes up is as important as what is planned." Given these uncertainties, interviewees placed considerable importance on being able to react promptly to emerging conditions.

Pressures to Deal With Immediate Concerns.

Daily demands for decisions and periodic crises that beset institutions were described by nearly everyone as permitting little time for engaging in formal planning. Not only were predictions uncertain but benefits from considering long-term prospects seem very distant to many persons. Consequently, when weighing consequences of neglecting immediate concerns in favor of long-term concerns, many said they were compelled to deal with current concerns first; even though some recognized they might be "neglecting the essential to address the important." Most pointed out the importance of taking time to consider longer range concerns while describing pressures making that difficult.

Costs Versus Benefits of Process.

Nearly everyone commented on the extensive time, resources and political capital required to conduct comprehensive institution-wide planning efforts. Comprehensive planning processes frequently opened up a broad array of latent as well as obvious political issues, overloading an institution's capacity for resolving them. Even those favoring planning suggested institution-wide processes should take place infrequently. Most persons who recently had participated in a major planning process did not wish to repeat it soon. Those most enthusiastic about planning often were persons who had not been through a process or were new at the institution. Persons who had experienced two or more planning cycles tended to be cynical about their benefits. Institution-wide planning processes often appeared to demand more time and energy than participants believed they could sustain. Nearly all planning process participants held full-time positions, with substantial responsibilities. Planning typically was an intense "overload" activity. From this perspective, institution-wide planning, particularly the efforts imposed by external agencies, often appeared as attempts to simultaneously address all the issues neglected or avoided by normal decision making processes. Many persons commented on the necessity of taking time to resolve complex, political issues, noting taking sufficient time resulted in decision being accepted in substance rather in form.

Failure to Focus on Major Issues

Comprehensive institution-wide planning processes often appeared to preclude devoting sufficient attention to particular concerns. In addition, these processes were not crafted to deal with characteristics of differing issues. The design of these processes, frequently did not locate

"ownership" of specific issues with persons willing and able to implement them. In some respects, comprehensive planning appeared to create an impression of action while important issues escaped serious scrutiny. Because of the breadth of topics, many issues were not addressed and resolved because of their political repercussions. This was particularly true of externally imposed plans because institutions sought to avoid "washing their dirty linens" in public. In many cases, those interviewed recognized the need to reduce faculty or staff in a unit but procrastinated because of human and political costs.

Expectation That Planning Will Increase Resources.

Planning processes were criticized by nearly everyone interviewed for creating unrealistic expectations that could not be fulfilled because of resource constraints. Virtually all faculty and department chairs viewed planning as a means to obtain additional resources. Since most unit's budgets increased incrementally each year, often to compensate for inflation, most persons believed formal campus-wide planning, as they had experienced it, was largely ineffective and costly. They rarely got additional funds to support their plans and often did not learn why their requests were not funded. In their calculus, the considerable resources expended in meetings and preparing planning documents did not equal the marginal benefits received from thinking through priorities and learning about plans and priorities of others. Administrators, on the other hand, were upset with unit plans that contained "wish lists" that were unconstrained by realistic views of available resources. Several institutions were seeking ways to encourage unit creativity without creating unrealistic expectations and disillusionment with planning.

Unrealistic Expectations About Revealing Priorities.

Literature on planning frequently promotes it as a means to reconsider priorities and, when indicated, to reallocate or reduce resources. Planning is promoted as a way to reveal problem areas and devise solutions. Project findings, however, suggest budgetary process politics make it highly unlikely units voluntarily, in advance of actual decisions, will reveal priorities and propose plans that could result in budget reductions. Priorities appear to be determined through political interactions and are evident after decisions are reached, not before bargaining takes place. Even when reductions appear inevitable, bargaining takes place before concessions to obtain quid pro quos. Attempts to get units to rank priorities or describe consequences of hypothetical budget reductions rarely appeared to serve useful purposes.

Unrealistic Expectations About Open Communications.

Planning literature frequently stresses the importance of open communications. Open communications are expected to reveal desirable initiatives and identify problems requiring action. Findings from the study, however, suggest units are unlikely to document significant problems for fear of negative public reactions. They believe, probably correctly, that the press, politicians and public will get exaggerated impressions of a problem's significance, not balancing weaknesses against institutional strengths. Their competitors, who may not be so forthcoming and may use such negative information in resource competitions. An academic administrator described one consequence of excessively open communications. He observed there was no place in his institution's structure to get broad, in depth discussions of major planning issues because the state's sunshine

laws required open meetings. An academic deans' group, he believed, was a possible place for planning discussions but they had not held them in years because reporters were present. He did believe, however, that the sunshine law sometimes was used as an excuse to avoid controversial issues.

Failure to Reconcile Individual and Collective Interests.

Institutional units often believed central initiatives were insensitive to their circumstances and concerns while central officials believed unit initiatives and interests sometimes were inconsistent with institution-wide interests. Faculty frequently voiced concerns about their lack of effective involvement in planning and sometimes complained that, even when they devoted substantial time to planning efforts, their recommendations went unheeded. However, senior campus administrators expressed concern about faculty ability to come to grips with sensitive problems involving program and staff reductions or competing interests of various campus constituencies. They often commented that faculty typically focused on protecting their "turfs" rather than on institutional welfare. Many administrators said they sought faculty "statesmen" for committees who would rise above their parochial interests. Nearly everyone complained about the inability of planning processes to resolve partisan concerns and act in the collective interest. Most persons described persistent issues that had not been addressed because of divergent interests. Traditions of faculty freedom and autonomy appeared to lead a few institutions to favor of overly decentralized, consensus building approaches to decision making that failed to resolve collective concerns, except in periods of extreme peril. Institutions who identified and had the capacity to deal quickly with painful issues appeared healthier than those whose processes permitted

procrastination. The longer solutions were delayed the more difficult was the recovery from festering problems. Faculty committees and departments frequently were criticized because of their inability to solve institution-wide issues. For example, curriculum revisions often proved difficult because faculty feared course enrollment changes would adversely affect their employment. Similarly, reallocations of funds to meet changing departmental enrollments were controversial and frequently delayed for considerable periods of time.

Focus on Documentation Rather Than Learning.

Some literature describes planning as a form of "learning." It helps members of an organization achieve a common understanding of its circumstances and agreement on its mission and programs. Many persons noted that deadlines, competing priorities and characteristics of some planning processes often impeded learning. While greater participation and attention to learning appeared to slow decision making, in fact, some argued it actually increased progress. Decisions based on common understandings were more likely to be implemented. Persons in many roles make decisions and, if fully informed, their decisions are likely to be more consistent with an institution's long-term interests. Hasty decisions often give the impression issues are resolved but persons actually continue to act under old premises and little actual change occurs.

Conclusions

Despite these many factors impeding the effectiveness of comprehensive formal planning, many institutions were successfully clarifying their visions, shaping their character and determining their directions. Characteristics and approaches common to these institutions appeared to

include the following:

- Institutional leaders actively sought to create trust and confidence among constituencies and clearly articulate institutional visions, missions and directions.
- Planning structures and processes were consistent with institutional traditions, culture and decision making patterns.
- Planning was integrated into normal decision making processes; it was not something primarily done by planners or a planning committee.
- Planning was focused on the most salient issues and opportunities; it was not a comprehensive effort.
- Important issues, even though politically controversial, were identified and dealt with promptly.
- Discussions of trends and their implications took place regularly. All relevant constituencies were involved and information on decisions was communicated widely.
- Planning approaches were tailored to the characteristics of issues needing attention.
- Planning processes were kept flexible to deal with opportunities and issues as they arose. Incentives, both tangible and intangible, were used to encourage entrepreneurship.
- Planning processes were kept simple and inexpensive to reduce participants' time and paper work.

- Administrators maintained realistic expectations about potential human and financial resources, while promoting entrepreneurship and seeking funds from nontraditional sources.
- Administrators recognized and accommodated the political aspects of allocating resources and sharing information when designing planning efforts.

Although institutions that dealt with current issues and concerns about the future in such a variety of ways may not appear to be "planning," in the traditional sense, they may, in fact, better accomplish the purposes and functions of planning.

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